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U.S. Senate OKs \$680B Defense Bill

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Lagging two weeks behind the U.S. House, the Senate finally passed the \$680.2 billion 2010 defense authorization bill Oct. 22 and sent it on to the White House, where President Barack Obama was expected to sign it.

The bill approves most of the major program cuts that Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates sought. It kills the:

- * F-22 stealth fighter.
- * Kinetic Energy Interceptor.
- * Combat search and rescue helicopter.
- * Presidential helicopter.
- * C-17 transport aircraft.

The bill also curtails the Airborne Laser and the Army's Future Combat Systems programs.

Lawmakers defied Obama and Gates by including \$560 million in the bill to continue developing an alternate engine for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). Gates threatened to recommend that Obama veto the bill if lawmakers included funding for a second engine and said it would "seriously disrupt the JSF program."

But the Senate Armed Services Committee chairman, Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., said the money for the second engine comes from outside the JSF program, and thus would not affect it.

The bill passed on a 68-29 vote, with 28 Republicans voting against it. Many who opposed the bill objected because an unrelated measure that extends federal hate crimes law to protect homosexuals was attached to the defense bill.

Other foes objected to the weapons cuts.

"The bill is the beginning of a downward spiral in defense spending," said

Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla. "We have reached a crossroads and have chosen not to invest in the long-term modernization and readiness of our military."

Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute offered a different analysis: The 2010 authorization bill "failed to halt the inexorable growth in military spending," he said. Cato is a libertarian think tank that advocates smaller government.

The \$680.2 billion authorized for defense spending is \$4.2 billion more than was spent in 2009.

And similar increases are projected to continue, said defense budget analyst **Christopher** Hellman. Over the next decade, the White House Office of Management and Budget estimates defense spending will increase by 25 percent, he said.

Nevertheless, future budgets for weapons are expected to be tight. Increases in the size of the Army by 30,000 soldiers, which the 2010 bill authorizes for 2011 and 2012, and rising personnel costs in general are expected to consume a larger percentage of the defense budget, eating up money that might otherwise be spent on weapons.

Congressional passage and a presidential signature on the authorization bill complete only half of the defense budget process for 2010. The other half, the 2010 defense appropriations bill that provides the actual money for the authorizations, is still pending.

At least one major cancellation in the authorization bill is expected to be revived by the appropriations bill - the C-17.

Despite claims by Levin and others that the authorization bill ends production of the aircraft, lawmakers voted to keep it alive in the appropriations bill. The House voted to spend \$674 million on three more C-17s and the Senate allocated \$2.5 billion for 10 more planes in the appropriations bill.

The appropriations bill will prevail, a congressional staffer said. *

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